

We tried to do this last year. The President threatened to veto the bill. He said we cannot simply afford to take care of those veterans. We can afford as much or more per year to exempt people who earn dividends on stock. We can afford as much or more per year to give millionaires an average of \$93,000 each in tax relief, but somehow we cannot afford that for our disabled veterans.

In fact, for the lifetime of these veterans, it would cost \$40 billion. Now, that is still a lot of money here. That is almost half as much money as the Congress borrowed just the other day to send to Iraq. That is a lot of money. But somehow the President says we cannot afford \$40 billion to deliver on our promises to these veterans for their lifetime for their disabilities.

There are, in fact, in the House 373 cosponsors of the bill. Then what is the problem? That is almost the entire House of Representatives on the bill. Well, the Republican leadership is the problem. They will not let the bill come up. And, of course, the President is a problem because he is threatening to veto the bill because we cannot afford to take care of these disabled veterans.

Now, there is a way to bring a bill to the floor when the Republican leaders refuse to bring a bill to do away with the disability tax on veterans. It is called a discharge petition. Need 218 people to sign it. Force the bill to the floor of the House over the objections of the Republican leadership. 203 people have signed it. Only two of those are Republicans. There are 158 Republicans who put their name on this bill, go home and tell their disabled veterans they want to help them, but they will not sign the discharge petition. They will not force the bill to the floor of the House.

Now, that would be a wonderful gift for our veterans for Veterans' Day if just another 15 Republicans who are cosponsors of the bill, claiming credit for it, have the guts to come down here and sign the petition, which is right behind me, to recognize our veterans properly for their service to our Nation. Now that would be a real Veterans' Day celebration.

#### THE CRISIS OF THE VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I would like to talk about the trend that we are seeing from this administration when it comes to protecting our troops and caring for our veterans. As more and more Americans are coming to understand, the VA health care system is in a crisis. Veterans are waiting months for appointments, and some are being turned away when they go to enroll in the system.

The bottom line here is funding, obviously. If we want the VA to provide

the veterans with quality care, then we need to recognize and address this funding problem.

There are two things that we can do. We can appropriate the money that is needed, or we can refuse to put the needed funds into the system and instead throw the burden on the backs of the veterans themselves.

Sadly, the second option is what this administration has chosen to do over the last 2½ years. I would like to describe a pattern of behavior that is coming from this administration. In February of 2002, this administration, through the VA, increased the veterans prescription drug copayment from \$2 to \$7 a prescription. Now, for veterans who are living on fixed incomes, many who take 8 or 10 or more prescriptions in a month, this is a tremendous financial burden. That was in February of 2002.

In July of 2002, this administration, through its VA, issued a gag order. The VA deputy secretary issued a memo that instructed all VA network directors to halt outreach activities aimed at encouraging new veterans to come in for services. Instead, providing the resources necessary, the VA says to their doctors, their social workers, their nurses, you can no longer actively inform veterans of what they are entitled to receive. They even went so far as to tell these doctors they could not participate in a community health fair. That was in July of 2002.

Well, in January of 2003, the VA decided they were going to create a new category of veterans. They called them Priority 8 veterans. These are veterans who served honorably. Many of them are combat-decorated veterans.

□ 2000

And the VA is saying to this group, you are out of here. Do not come to us. You can no longer enroll in the VA health care system because you make too much money.

Well, the American people need to know that those of us who serve in this Chamber make about \$155,000 a year and a combat-decorated veteran can make as little as \$24,000 a year, and the VA is saying to you, you can no longer participate in VA health care. Think about that. We make \$155,000, a veteran who served honorably, perhaps even in combat, can make as little as \$24,000 a year and this administration says they are high income, so you cannot participate. I think that is shameful, quite frankly. Shameful.

Well, that was in January of 2003. You see the pattern? Episode after episode of the VA doing things that are harmful to the veteran.

Well, then in January 2003, the President sent his budget request to us. And in the President's budget request, he suggested that we not charge a veteran \$7 for each prescription but that that be increased to \$15 a prescription.

Now, think about that. At a time when we are preparing to send our young men and women into battle, the

President rewards our veterans by asking that their prescription drug costs be increased from \$7 to \$15 a prescription. It gets worse. In that same budget request coming from the President, he asked that there be a new annual enrollment fee imposed upon Category 7 and 8 veterans of \$250 a year. I just think this is outrageous. The veterans of this country are coming to understand who their friends are. And how can this administration claim to be a friend of the veteran and at the same time put these increasingly onerous financial burdens upon them.

Well, I want to talk about one other issue this evening with the time I have left. A few months ago, I received a letter from a soldier in Iraq who was concerned that his troops had not been provided basic, modern bulletproof vests, but instead were issued Vietnam-era flak jackets. The flak jackets are designed to protect against slower moving shrapnel and are incapable of stopping high-velocity projectiles such as bullets from assault weapons, and we sent our soldiers into battle in Iraq without this most basic protection. Shame on us.

PERMISSION TO HAVE UNTIL 6 A.M. FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2003 TO FILE CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 1588, NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT FOR FISCAL YEAR 2004

Mr. BEREUTER. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that the managers on the part of the House may have until 6 a.m. Friday, November 7, 2003, to file a conference report on the bill, (H.R. 1588) to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2004 for military activities of the Department of Defense, for military construction, and for defense activities of the Department of Energy, to prescribe personnel strengths for such fiscal year for the Armed Forces, and for other purposes.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. PEARCE). Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Nebraska?

There was no objection.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. GUTKNECHT) is recognized for 5 minutes.

(Mr. GUTKNECHT addressed the House. His remarks will appear hereafter in the Extensions of Remarks.)

#### CARING FOR OUR VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. MILLER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MILLER of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, others have spoken tonight on specific issues before Congress that affect our Nation's veterans. I rise to say how proud I am of the men and women now serving in our Nation's Armed Forces in Iraq.

Mr. Speaker, as you know, I spent 3 days last week in Iraq as part of a Congressional delegation. I ate lunch and supper with our soldiers in Bagdad on Friday. Sunday morning I attended a worship service with our soldiers in Kirkuk. That day, I had lunch with our soldiers in Kirkuk and supper with our soldiers in Tikrit.

They slept on cots. They used port-a-johns, but their spirits were high and their dedication undimmed.

Our delegation stopped briefly in Germany on the way home. We visited soldiers at a military hospital in Landstuhl. Our military escorts told us what to expect. Regardless of the pain they were in, regardless of how their lives would be changed by their injuries, the patients we had talked to were soldiers, and when they spoke with us, they would soldier up.

I spoke with men who had grievous injuries. I heard not one word of complaint. I visited several of the soldiers who were on the Chinook helicopter that was shot down Sunday near Falujah. The medical personnel told us that it would help to encourage them to talk about what had happened. I will spare you the details of the injuries they suffered and that they saw their buddies suffer.

The gentleman from Hawaii (Mr. CASE) and I asked them what message they would have us deliver, what they wanted us to tell the folks back home. They said to tell folks back home to support our soldiers when they got home. And one told me to tell the soldiers in his unit that he loved them.

Another young man was wounded when his convoy was ambushed. They were ambushed with rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire. A grenade landed near him and caused a traumatic amputation of his arm. A buddy applied a tourniquet and two of his buddies commandeered an Iraqi truck and evacuated him from the fire fight.

In the truck he said two prayers. The first is that he would live to be a father, that he would help his children with their homework, that he would take them to ball games, that he would watch them grow up. The second prayer was that the eight soldiers who remained behind would survive. And they all did. The young man had lost his arm, but he was grateful that the Lord had answered his prayers.

My visit to our soldiers in Iraq and in the hospital in Landstuhl reminded me of the duty our men and women in uniform feel in defending our Nation and of the sacrifices they are making in answering that call.

The benefits our Nation provides, our Nation's veterans are well-earned. They are the least we can do for those who defended our freedom at the risk of their lives.

Mr. Speaker, as a Member of Congress, I will do all that I can to honor our Nation's debt to those men and women.

#### PERSONAL EXPLANATION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Michigan (Mr. MCCOTTER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. MCCOTTER. Mr. Speaker, I rise for the purpose of entering into the RECORD how I would have voted on issues before the House that I was unable to vote on on Wednesday, October 29 and on Thursday, October 30.

On rollcall No. 579, I was the sponsor of the resolution and would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 578, I was a cosponsor of the bill and would have voted yes.

On Thursday, October 30, on rollcall No. 580, I would have voted no. On rollcall No. 581, I would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 584, I would have voted no. On rollcall No. 585, I would have voted no. On rollcall No. 586, I would have voted yes. On roll 588, I would have voted no.

On rollcall 589, I would have voted no. On rollcall No. 590, I would have voted no. And on rollcall No. 594, I would have voted no.

On substantive votes, on rollcall No. 582, I would have voted yes. On rollcall 583, I would have voted yes. On rollcall 587, I would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 591, I would have voted no. On roll 592, I would have voted yes.

On rollcall No. 593, I have would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 595, I would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 596, I would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 597, I would have voted yes. On rollcall No. 598, I would have voted no. On rollcall No. 599, I would have voted no. On roll No. 601, I would have voted yes. On roll No. 600, I would have voted no.

The purpose for my inability to vote on these issues is, as the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. MILLER) pointed out, there was a Congressional delegation that went to Iraq to visit with our troops and to inspect reconstruction and also to stop and visit our troops in the hospital at Landstuhl.

While this business in front of our House was extremely important, I believe that nothing was more important for showing our support for the troops and inspecting the conditions under which they must exist and survive.

In fact, I would just like to say that no matter how important this business was, nothing to me last week was more important than visiting with the troops at Landstuhl and to hear one of our fallen soldiers who had been in the Chinook say that he had gone through the most traumatic experience of his life and would not wish it upon his worst enemy. For in that moment he proved to me and all the world not only the bravery and courage of the American men and women in uniform, but their compassion as well.

#### MAKE VETERANS A PRIORITY

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, today I would like to join several of my colleagues who have already spoken tonight, including the gentleman from the great State of Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND), and join him in talking about the plight of veterans in our country.

As Veterans Day is coming up next week, I thought it would be an opportune time to talk for a few minutes about what is going on in this country with our veterans.

We have Veterans Day, but really every day should be Veterans Day, but we designate a specific day as we do Christmas and birthdays to remind us as we go throughout the year that we have to continue the fight for our veterans. Unfortunately, the servicemen and women and veterans today are fighting on two fronts. They are fighting on the front in the Middle East and, unfortunately, they are fighting on the front back at home.

Back at home the veterans are not having too much success, and I would like to use one example of concurrent receipt. And for those people watching tonight who do not know what concurrent receipt is, it is basically a disabled veterans tax. If a disabled veteran gets a retirement from the military, not the disability benefits but a retirement pay check, the Federal Government will deduct from your disability benefits and you will only receive your military retirement. Some vets are losing 18, 20, \$25,000. You steal the benefits from their retirement, and you supposedly substitute that from what they should be receiving for their disability. So these are people who got hurt, who have earned in many ways the benefits that they are getting, but now they are not receiving them.

So someone came up with a plan. And what they are going to do is they are going to phase out this disabled veterans tax over the next 10 years. So someone who fought in World War II, in the 1940s and may be 80, 81 years old today, this plan says that you will not get your full disability for 10 years. So we are asking veterans who are 81 years old, actually, we are telling them, that they will not be able to receive their benefits until they are 91 years old. Talk about an outrage. Talk about an outrage.

The American Legion National Commander said, It is a matter of priorities in Washington, D.C. Four hundred thirty five thousand military retirees altogether, 135,000 disabled retirees will not qualify for full relief until 2014. Good luck.

In Ohio, my home State, full concurrent receipt would benefit if they did it right. If we paid the bill, if we paid these disabled veterans what we owe them, it would benefit 9,617 disabled vets.

Under the Republican plan, only 2,249 will be receiving the benefits, which leaves 7,368 disabled vets in the great State of Ohio left out in the cold.

Now, as the American Legion Commander said, Washington, D.C. is about